

## RASIPURAM KRISHNASWAMI LAXMAN

Gouri R.

‘All my life I have painted crows. Singly, in pairs, threesomes, whole murders of them.’ He breaks off to chuckle. ‘Don’t look so horrified. Murder is the collective noun for crows. Even as a child I had been fascinated by them. They are smart, lively and have a ‘strong survival instinct. The common crow is really an uncommon bird.’

The speaker is the uncommon creator of that common man who represents the mute millions of this country—who else but Rasipuram Krishnaswami Laxman, India’s most celebrated cartoonist? Forty years of cartooning have dimmed neither Laxman’s brilliance nor the bafflement of his check-coated man who blinks at the political scene from his front-page corner in *The Times of India*.

When I approached him for an interview, Laxman refused point-blank to talk about his profession. ‘You will ask me what every damn fool asks me—’ ‘How do you get your ideas everyday?’ ‘As though I could explain. And if I did, as though you could understand!’

But he was willing to talk about his passion for crows, with many digressions and sly digs at the sacred cows in the Indian mind.

A year later I found myself in his office cabin listening to descriptions of his childhood. Quick pencil sketches showed me what he was talking about. His words had all the distinguishing features of a Laxman cartoon—the fine eye for detail, the pungent wit, the puckish sparkle, the sudden probe below the surface, and hearty guffaws at the absurdities of life.

What is it that makes R.K. Laxman so special among cartoonists?

Laxman’s own answer would be, ‘My genius, what else?’

‘A little humility is not a bad thing if you are at the top,’ writes fellow cartoonist Sudhir Dar (*The Illustrated Weekly of India*) as he recounts this story of the cartoonist Ranan Lurie’s meeting with Laxman. When the American asked him who the best Indian cartoonist was, Laxman flashed back, ‘I am.’ ‘The second, third, fourth, fifth best man on the job?’ Laxman continued to repeat ‘I am’.

Colleagues list other faults—naiveté, inaccurate caricature, old-fashioned style, lack of experimentation, repetitiveness, verbosity. Even while admitting that he has no peer in pocket cartoons, they call his political cartooning atrocious. No acid-throwing or lava burst—Laxman is too cosy, pleasant, decent, gentle. ‘He doesn’t take the debate forward,’ says O.V. Vijayan. ‘There is no political comment, only political statement,’ says cartoonist Ravi Shankar. ‘He is not easily provoked. And doesn’t want to provoke his readers either,’ comments Abu Abraham.

Laxman may not impress an international, particularly the Western, audience. ‘Why should he? He draws for us,’ says my friend Keshav (a cartoonist for *The Hindu*). ‘No other cartoonist has understood the average Indian as Laxman has. This gives him a far wider reach than his sophisticated colleagues. From garbage disposal to nuclear physics, he can make you see every issue clearly and in a new light.’

We leaf through Laxman's cartoon collections, illustrations, even doodles. One of them shows a room in the Space Centre where scientists are busy with the 'Man on the Moon Project'. Pictures of a rocket and a cratered moon loom over them. A long-coated scientist enters, points to the common man standing at the doorway and says he has found the perfect space traveller. The man from India can survive without water, food, light, air, shelter'.

When we stop laughing Keshav asks me, 'Can you call this superficial? A Laxman cartoon has two characteristics. It is drama frozen at a crucial moment with something before and something after it. He puts us on the spot. We feel the whole ambience. The common man is helpless in his country; he chokes with frustrations and fury. Laxman's cartoons convert this rage into humour.'

Laxman's missilic rise began very early. While still at the Maharaja's College, Mysore, studying politics, economics and philosophy, he began to illustrate his elder brother R.K. Narayan's stories in *The Hindu*. He drew political cartoons for the local papers, and for the *Swatantra*, edited by doyen Khasa Subba Rao. He held a summer job at the Gemini Studios, Madras.

After graduation Laxman went to Delhi to find a job as cartoonist. *The Hindustan Times* told him he was too young, that he should start with provincial papers. The *Free Press Journal* in Bombay had no such qualms. Laxman found himself seated next to another cartoonist who was furiously drawing a bird in a cage. His name was Bal Thackeray. ('Is that an Indian name?' wondered Laxman who knew only of William Makepeace Thackeray.)

One day the *Journal* proprietor banned him from making fun of communists. So the twenty-three-year old Laxman left, caught a Victoria, and walked into *The Times of India* office. From that day 'I had a table and a room to myself which I have used ever since.' And used with a freedom unknown to any Indian journalist for as long.

Laxman feels oppressed by having to turn out a cartoon everyday. 'Each morning I grumble, I plan to resign as I drag myself to the office. By the time I come home I like my work.'

Laxman plays with every shade of humour—wit, satire, irony, slapstick, buffoonery, tragicomedy. Such versatility dazzles as does his unwearied discipline. Through the long, prolific years the man] from Mysore has never hit anyone below the belt. And that makes him India's most beloved cartoonist.

### **THROUGH A COLOURED GLASS**

In our old house in Mysore, there was a window. It had a glass pane divided into many parts. Each part had a different colour. One day, the pane broke. Bits of coloured glass tinkled down.

I ran to pick up those pieces. I looked at every colour, one after another. Suddenly, I happened to see through the glass. And I saw a new world! It was strange... weird... frightening. Everybody and everything looked blue. The blue gardener dug the blue earth. Nearby stood a blue cow swishing its blue tail. Why, the sun had turned blue in the sickly sky. Everything was spooky and still. I couldn't bear it anymore.

Quickly, I raised the green glass piece. Thank God, things became cheerful again. The same gardener was shovelling away with a bucket by this side. The cow turned friendly.

But I had to try out the red piece. It struck terror into my heart. The cow was ready to attack me, the dog bared its teeth, the gardener was digging up a skeleton under the neem tree! Red clouds gathered in a bloody sky. The world was a scene of war. Sweating and trembling, I switched back to green. At once things calmed down. It was a cool, pleasant day out in the garden at home where the breeze blew softly. Father and mother were out. I was free to play the whole evening.

As I remember it, this was my first communication with my surroundings. I loved looking through the broken glass pieces, feeling different with each colour. Perhaps this was an early sign of my interest in visual things—in drawing and painting that were to be my life.

If you ask, how did a three-year old boy get to handle pieces of broken glass, the answer is: ours was a big family. I was the youngest of five brothers and two sisters. My sisters were married; my brothers went to school and college. Father was the headmaster of the local school. Mother was busy somewhere deep inside the sprawling house. There was no one to question me then {and no one dares to question me now!} My constant companions were the old gardener and Rover, my dog. They didn't mind what I did, so long as I didn't bother them.

What's that? You want to know what the dog ^looked like? He had ears hanging down and tongue hanging out. Rover was a dull and stupid Great/Dane. But we had good fun together.

The gardener was an old man. He had gnarled, knotty hands, just like the roots of a tree. He looked rather like a tree himself, tall and wooden. His skin was an even brown—it had no colour variations at all. He was my friend. Oh what stories he would tell me! All about his own brave deeds and strange experiences. One of them was about his childhood. It was my favourite.

When the gardener was a little child he used to go into the forest to cut wood. Once, as he trudged home with a bundle of sticks on his head, the evening shadows lengthened. The night sounds of the jungle began. They hurried his footsteps. As he passed by the river he saw a banyan tree dropping its branches over the grey waters. What was that crouching on the branch? Why, it was a white sheet. No...no, it was a ghost! His eyes forgot to blink. The ghost jumped— jumped right into the river, and came up noiselessly. It came dripping out into the river bank, a ghost no more! It had taken the form of a human being. The gardener screamed and ran for his life. He reached the village gasping for breath. He had himself become as white as that ghost on the tree.

At this exciting moment my gardener friend would stop clearing the ground, lean upon his rake and look this way and that to make sure no one was within earshot. He would drop his voice to a hoarse whisper. 'Oh yes, little master, that river is still there, so is the banyan tree. And so is the ghost, ready to jump into the water, change himself to a man, and mislead travellers at night. Why? What do you mean why? The ghost drinks human blood, that's why!

With stories like these, are you surprised I developed a terrible fear of the dark? I shivered when I saw twilight shadows. Present-day psychologists would say that it is very

wrong to frighten children. But I disagree. I think it is a wonderful experience to be frightened out of one's wits. If you bring up a child without ghost stories, he will grow up to be frightened of something else. I believe that horror is necessary for normal growth.

Later, when I was twelve or so, I decided to overcome these fears. Late at night, I used to go to the cremation ground near our house, and watch the flames still leaping over the corpse. At last the embers would glow red. It made a striking sight in the black silence.

The gardener's other stories were equally scary, even when they were about real creatures. Sitting on a stone or a patch of grass, I would watch the gardener draw water from the big well, or hew the logs for the brick stove in the backyard. This stove was used for boiling cauldrons of water for the family to bathe in. Mysore mornings could be quite chilly. The gardener would stop working, wipe the sweat from his face and say, 'Once, when I was doing just this, a slight rustle made me turn. And I saw a snake right behind me. What do you think; it was a cobra, all of twenty feet long. Its hood was up and swaying. Its tongue flashed in and out, ready to strike. I picked up a stone from the ground and threw it. The snake made a swipe at me, but I sidestepped. This time, I grabbed the stick I had left by the well, and hit it hard. I kept hitting until it twisted itself into a knot and died on the spot.'

The creatures changed from story to story, but the main action of hitting and killing remained the same. The victims were always poisonous, dangerous or ferocious. The gardener was always strong, brave and clever.

And looking at him, tall and brawny, brown muscles rippling in the sun, I could believe every one of those stories. The old gardener was a hero in my eyes.

And so I lazed in the garden, a huge one full of trees, bushes and hiding places for a growing child, far from the sight (and the calls) of grown-ups inside the house. I would watch the squirrels and insects scurrying by, and birds of every description.

When did I start drawing? May be at the age of three. I started on the wall, of course, like any normal child. Parents were more tolerant in those days. No one stopped my scribbling on the wall. I drew with bits of burnt wood that I got from the hot water stove in the backyard. What did I draw? Oh, the usual things—trees, houses, the sun behind the hill...

I was not at all a good student in the classroom. The one time I got a pat on the back from the teacher was for one of my drawings. We were all asked to draw a leaf. Each child scratched his head and wondered what a leaf looked like. One drew a banana leaf which became too big for the slate. Another drew a speck that couldn't be seen—a tamarind leaf! Some just managed blobs. When the teacher came to me he asked, 'Did you draw this by yourself?' I hesitated. Had I done wrong? Will my ear be twisted? My cheek slapped? I nodded dumbly. And do you know, the teacher actually broke into a smile! He said I had done a very good job. He saw great possibilities in that leaf I drew so long ago on a hot afternoon, sitting in the dull classroom. I had seen that leaf on the peepal tree which I passed each day on my way to school.

Generally, people take everything for granted. They hardly see anything around them. But I had a keen eye. I observed everything and had a gift for recalling details. This is essential for every cartoonist and illustrator.

As far back as I can remember, the crow attracted me because it was so alive on the landscape. In our garden it stood out black against the green trees, blue sky, red earth and the yellow compound wall. Other birds are timid. They try to hide and camouflage themselves. But the crow is very clever. It can look after itself very well.

At age three I began to sketch crows. I tried to draw their antics. My mother saw this and encouraged me. She told me that Lord Shaniśvara used the crow for his mount. He was a very powerful god, she added; 'If you draw His crow, surely He will send you good luck.'

I have never grown out of this childhood fascination for the crow. I have painted hundreds of crows, singly and in groups, from near and far, and in many moods. Sometimes I put crows into my cartoons. My crow paintings have gone to many countries—one of them hangs in faraway Iceland now!

There were many trees in our garden. Mango, wood apple, margosa, drumstick... Every single tree spelt adventure. I would scramble right to their tops and watch the world from the heights. How different the same old places looked from the tree top! But climbing them was not without its terrors. Imagine a small child suddenly coming upon a chameleon on the branch, motionless and menacing! It is really a pre-historic animal, you know. So are the lizards—*onaan*, as we call them—just a twitching tail to show they are alive. When I think back, I realize that to a child, reality seems much more fabulous than fantasy. From a ladybird to a mouse, anything that moves can startle him.

Our garage was a jungle of junk, cobwebs and scorpions which were big or very small, but all quite deadly. Scorpion hunting was a favourite sport for us children. We would move an old tin or kick the rubble. Sure enough, a scorpion would scuttle out. We would beat it to pulp with a stick or stone. My brothers had another pastime. They would catch grasshoppers. The idea was to train them to do tricks, and amaze the world with a grasshopper circus of their own. But the creatures died after a day in their cardboard boxes, though the boxes were lined with grass and filled with tasty titbits from our kitchen.

Perhaps you think we had cruel games. But all children are like that. You see them killing butterflies, throwing stones at dogs, teasing kittens. Only when we grow older do we learn to be kind and realize that selfishness is bad. But even then not all of us learn these things. Otherwise why would there be fights and wars?

But let me get back to the garden again. It was a never-ending source of stories that I made up for myself. For example, have you ever watched an ant hill? Seen the ants going about busily? There are usually two orderly files—one going out, the other coming in. My elder brother, the one just before me, was very inventive. He used to tell me that these ants lived in an enormous township inside the hill. This town had broad streets and big houses, post offices and police stations, playgrounds and movie theatres. Why, the ants even had their own cinema posters. He never tired of spinning fantastic stories about the secret life of the ants!

My two sisters were married and gone. They only came on occasional visits. My brothers lived with us, three of them, almost grown up. But they could all be counted upon to make my life interesting. What a fine time we had together! When the rain clouds loomed in the sky, all of us would run out and watch the way they made shapes and

spread themselves into a dark blanket above. My brothers let me join their games sometimes—from cricket to kite-flying. All of them read aloud to me from English books and explained the difficult parts.

Father used to get many magazines for his school. They arrived in big bundles every week, from Madras, London and New York—*Harpers, Boys Own Paper, Punch, Atlantic, American Mercury, The Merry Magazine, The Times Literary Supplement...* brothers read the before they were taken away from our house.

The *Strand Magazine* published Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories about the famous detective Sherlock Holmes. I remember sitting on my brother's lap as he read those stories out to the three younger ones, translating them for me into Tamil. Mother had gone to the Ladies' Club, leaving us in his charge. This must have been the safest way of keeping us under his watchful eye!

My mother was a remarkable woman. Her's was a hectic life. We had a retinue of servants, including a cook, but she had her hands full managing the household. She did some cooking at times. It was of the experimental kind. She would bake shortcakes and butter biscuits for us. Once she followed a magazine recipe and made toothpowder! At another time she made a new kind of fuel for the boiler, a copper vessel with a water heating system attached to it. Come summer and she would start rolling out *papads* at home—flat round pieces like *chapattis* which were dried on the terrace. We children would hop around and try to help her. She never said it was a bother but let us do what we liked.

Mother had several hobbies. One of them was to buy litho prints of gods and human beings. She would dress them up with bits of cloth, mirrors, beads and sequins. How hideous they looked! But in those days they were in fashion. One of her pictures was called 'Vanity'. It had a woman decked out in gold-lace saree and gaudy jewellery.

Mother was good at both tennis and badminton. She also played golf. She was the unbeaten local chess champion. She played a good game of bridge as well. At home we loved it when she joined us for carrom or card games. She brought so much life and laughter with her.

I was very proud of my mother. Whatever I know I learnt from her. What a voracious reader she was! She had never stepped into school or college, but there was nothing she did not know about Sanskrit and Tamil literature. She kept up with English writing through translations. We boys would read to her and tell her everything we found in books and magazines.

How many myths and legends she knew! I must say that the best versions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata I know are from her story-telling.

At night she would come up to lie down on her bed upstairs. Then all of us would gather around her. We would chat, crack jokes, tell stories, tell her about our friends, ask for advice... Just thinking about those times makes me happy. How lucky we were to have such a wonderful mother!

Father....There is just one word to describe him— 'formidable'. Are you frightened by that word? Well, it means just that— 'frightening'. As a school teacher and headmaster he was very stern about discipline. I was rather scared of him. But as you know, you need not hate the person you dread. Just look at him, isn't he like a marble statue with his beak

of a nose and a bald head like Julius Caesar? Can any child get close to someone like that?

This is what my elder brother and novelist R.K. Narayan wrote about father in his autobiography, *My Days*: 'He has the personality of a commander-in-chief rather than a headmaster,' people used to remark, a stentorian voice, a sharp nose and a lion-like posture—a man who didn't fuss about children openly, and never sat around and chatted with the members of the family as was the habit of others. He moved in fixed orbits at home. He had a well worn route from his room to the dining or bath room, set hours during which he could be seen at different points, and if one kept out of his way, as I thought then, one was safe for the rest of the day.

He left for school on a bicycle, impeccably dressed in tweed suit and tie, crowned with snow-white turban, at about 9.30 every morning, and he returned home at nine at night, having spent his time at the officers' club on the way, playing tennis and meeting his friends, who were mostly local government officials. At night a servant would go out with a lantern in order to light my father's path back home, and to carry his tennis racquet, leaving him to walk back swinging his cane, to keep off growling street dogs all along the path, which lay sunk in the dust. I must admit I did not know my brother

Narayan was a writer until I saw that he had won a prize from *The Merry Magazine* for a short story.

This was called 'Dodu, the Moneymaker'. It was about a little boy struggling to find money for his urgent needs—like groundnuts and candy! I was very excited because this sounded suspiciously like me. Moreover, the hero of the story had my name! After that I watched Narayan's activities with respect. He would pound away upon a huge Underwood typewriter. Perhaps all that banging was for his first novel *Swami and Friends*, a story about boys growing up in a small town called Malgudi. All Narayan's stories were to be set in this non-existent town. But little did I think then that I would get to know Malgudi as well as Narayan himself. Because later, I was to illustrate my brother's stories. At that time Narayan was also writing articles for a newspaper in Madras. I had a cycle. My brother used to pay me a commission to pedal furiously to the post office and mail his copy on time.

I was about nine or ten when I decided to be an artist. I would cycle for ten miles around our home to find interesting landscapes to paint. Mysore was a good place for this—full of trees, streams, hills and old ruins. I also learnt a lot by looking at illustrations in foreign magazines. The cartoons were a special attraction. I began to draw cartoons and found the local papers willing to publish them! The people I chose to poke fun at were international names—Churchill, Hitler, Mussolini, Nehru and Gandhi! I must have done well because I was asked to draw posters too, for the defence programme and for adult education. I earned my pocket money and never had to trouble my parents for it. 'Dodu' had found the way!

When Narayan's stories began to get published in *The Hindu*, Madras, he asked me to illustrate them. I knew exactly what he wanted, and whom he had in mind for his characters. Didn't we belong to the same place? Hadn't I spent hours in every spot around us, including the busy market square? Hadn't I sketched all those real people he wrote about? Look at this old vegetable seller. She refuses to bring her price down despite the customer's determined haggling.

As I drew hundreds of pictures I picked up the techniques quite naturally. Trial and error taught me to use brush and paint and ink. Others besides Narayan began to ask me to illustrate their stories for them.

When I grew up and became a full-time cartoonist, I had little time to paint or to illustrate stories. But I did draw Thama the baby elephant, little bird Gumchikki who was his best friend, and other woodland creatures. My wife Kamala wrote stories about their adventures in the jungle.

But back in boyhood I found that Narayan could be quite a grim elder brother. He thought it was his duty to make me a better child, teach me good manners and proper behaviour. He would order me to stop biting my nails—or else...! But since he chewed his nails as he said it, the words had little effect. He would scold me for using my shirt front to wipe my hands and face. ‘How many times should I tell you that there are towels for just this purpose?’ He would forbid me to climb trees or ride the cycle crossbar at breakneck speed. Tell me, can any boy obey such rules?

The worst was when he banned the use of our garden for playing cricket. As the captain of The Rough and Tough and Jolly Cricket Team, I lugged my bats and stumps and led my team mates in a frustrating search for a games field. But though Narayan did not relent, he wrote about my misery in a story called ‘The Regal Cricket Club’. My brother did not think it was strange that he should sympathize so heartily with me in his writing, but not in life!

I must tell you something about Mysore where I grew up. Before India got her independence from the British, Mysore was a princely state. It had a Maharaja ruling over it. He thought that he was a god and his state was the whole world. Most of his subjects thought the same—especially when he put on splendid shows for the people in his royal court, and outdoors during festivals.

The Dussehra festival in Mysore was justly famous. A long and fabulous procession would march past the open-mouthed crowds. There were show horses, trained by Europeans, which danced along daintily to Western tunes. Jewels gleamed on their sleek white bodies. Under petromax lights they looked like fairy creatures. There were richly decorated camels in that procession, looking disdainful about everything! And of course the most splendid sight that we waited for—the elephants! How gorgeous they looked—covered as they were with gold and velvet!

From the palace the Maharaja would go to the Banni Mandap. Banni was a tree he worshipped with ancient rites. The crowds packing the streets would shout ‘Victory to the Emperor! Maharaja ki Jai! The king was dressed in a long coat of gold brocade on which huge emeralds sparkled between diamonds. A jaunty feather rose from his turban. It was fastened with a brooch of rubies.

But WB have got to keep it here, sir, till the capitol is paid. This was pledged as security?

The Maharaja did look majestic as he swayed along on the silk-lined *howda* on top of the biggest elephant in the procession. Behind him came the royal family, suitably mounted according to rank. There were guests and British visitors. They were seated on chairs arranged on enormous chariots, each as big as a room. These open chariots were drawn by elephants. Then came the Mysore Lancers, rigid and upright on their horses,



holding their lances at an angle. Each regiment had its own colours— blue and white, red and blue or green and red. The palace band provided rousing music as an accompaniment to this fantastic spectacle.

I was taken to the court a few times. The Maharaja was a lover of classical music and famous musicians would sing for him. But the way in which these musicians came and went seemed quite funny to me. They were brought to the ground floor in the palace, made to sit on a platform with their instruments. (Everyone had to wear a turban; it was a mark of respect to the king!) When the Maharaja came to court and sat down on his throne, the platform would rise up like a lift through a shaft, to his floor, and reach his presence. The concert would begin and go on for about an hour. When the Maharaja signalled the end, the stage would start moving, back to the ground floor again, with all the musicians still seated on it. As soon as the stage began to descend, the musicians would launch themselves hurriedly into the *Mangalam*—a song which is always sung at the end of a Carnatic music concert. Halfway through, the sounds seemed to come up from a deep well!

But I must say that Mysore had a very elegant way of life. We dressed well, we were expected to be well-mannered. We used to laugh at our Madras cousins who went about without shirts, wearing just a dhoti round their waist.

I cannot end without telling you about my school. I began to attend classes when I was five years old. I hated school. A normal feeling. Tell me, which child likes to go to school? I felt wretched in the classroom. I am convinced that school-learning is unnatural and bad for human beings.

In school we sat on the floor and chorused our lessons. The teachers were terrible. They would write something on the board, ask us to take it down and go out to gossip or to smoke *beedis*. I was very naughty. I got punished and thrashed quite often. But it did not stop me from mischief.

My family insisted that I should attend school, but did not scold me when I failed exams. I barely managed to pass each year. It was the same story when I joined college. I scraped through my BA examinations. What a relief it was to know that I need never go into a classroom again!

After this I tried getting a job as a cartoonist in New Delhi. But *The Hindustan Times* told me I was too young to be a newspaper cartoonist. I was more successful in Bombay. I got work in *The Blitz* and the *Free Press Journal*. Besides cartoons I did comic strips telling the stories of Tantri the Magician and other ‘heroes’. Very soon I made a name for myself and joined a big English newspaper, *The Times of India*. For forty-seven years I have been drawing cartoons for its front page. A stamp was brought out to celebrate the 150th year of this newspaper, and the picture on it was one of my cartoons.

Yes, I have worked very hard and long. But I have not forgotten that you can see the world through pieces of coloured glass. Nor have I lost my love for those noisy black birds which are always around us, managing to survive. I continue to paint crows with as much enjoyment as I did on those long ago days of carefree childhood, when each day was exciting and every hour brought adventure.